

# Raising Awareness of Menopause in the Workplace

## Report 2023





# Contents

<b>Raising awareness of menopause in the workplace</b>	<b>3</b>
Perceptions, misunderstandings and diagnosis of menopause	3
So what exactly is menopause?	4
Becoming a menopause-friendly organisation	6
Changing our attitude to menopause	9







# Raising awareness of menopause in the workplace

When people say 'the fastest growing workforce demographic' you assume they are referring to Gen Zs and immediately think of that generation's need for doing meaningful work, **flexibility**, and **values** alignment in their careers. It's at the other end of the age spectrum, however, where the workforce is rapidly expanding its numbers. And this cohort is also forcing companies to rethink their approaches across a range of employment areas.

An estimated eight out of ten of those going through menopause are currently employed – this is a huge cultural shift that is bringing a historically unspoken or taboo subject right to the fore of workplace discussions. **Nigel Wright Group** was delighted to welcome Sally Leech from Henpicked: Menopause in the Workplace to discuss how employers can do more to make a huge difference in the experiences of employees who are going through menopause at work.

## Perceptions, misunderstandings and diagnosis of menopause

A mental image associated with menopause is often of a hot, tired, and angry middle-aged woman. Given that this is a prevailing social perception, it's traditionally been very hard for people to admit to their employers that they are 'going through the change.' Instead, people going through menopause have, for years, suffered in silence as they experience a range of unpleasant symptoms including anxiety, memory loss, lack of sleep and, the most familiar one, hot flashes.

'Middle age' is also an unhelpful label. While the average age of reaching menopause in the UK and most of the world today is 51, symptoms can often start in the early to mid-forties. Some people can even enter





menopause before they reach 40 years old, with a condition called premature ovarian insufficiency (POI). It's not always a natural life transition either. Hysterectomy or oophorectomy surgery, as well as treatment for types of cancer, can also trigger menopause.

Further, people suffering from anxiety, memory loss and lack of sleep don't automatically consider menopause as the cause of these ailments. They attribute symptoms to other life factors and take no action. Menopause is actually difficult to diagnose due to fluctuating hormones. GP understanding and knowledge of menopause varies too, and it can often remain undiagnosed. Conversely, it can easily be misdiagnosed for other illnesses impacting the body.

Fifty years ago, menopause was associated with old age and retirement. Yet with more women joining the workforce and working into their later years than ever before, there is undoubtedly an urgency for change. A significant period of life can now be spent at work during the perimenopause, menopause and post-menopause years. Without a cultural shift to prioritise menopause awareness, organisations risk losing out on latent talent.

According to Henpicked, all of this reinforces the need for organisations themselves to take a lead in changing the conversation around menopause. Research indicates that one in four people going through menopause consider leaving work because of their symptoms. Creating a workplace culture where discussing menopause is normal, where employees are educated and informed about it, and where the requisite help and advice are available, will only generate positive outcomes.

## So what exactly is menopause?

Given the misconceptions and problems surrounding menopause outlined above, it's important to clarify some basic menopause facts before we consider what organisations can do to become menopause-friendly employers. According to Henpicked, the simple act of defining and explaining some of the key terms associated with menopause can have an immediate positive impact. It develops understanding and means people will rely on actually acquired knowledge rather than their assumptions when making menopause-related decisions.

Menopause is a one-day event that occurs when a someone hasn't had a period for 12 months. Once somebody reaches menopause, the following day they're considered to be post-menopausal for the rest of their life. Hormonal changes and fluctuations can begin around five to seven years prior to menopause, and this is known as the perimenopause stage. Some of the common symptoms of menopause may also start at this time.

Estrogen, progesterone and testosterone are the three main hormones that experience imbalances. Collectively, these hormones control factors such as brain and heart health, sleep, confidence and mood, amongst others. When estrogen, progesterone and testosterone levels fluctuate, hot flashes and night sweats can be common, and people may also experience achy joints, changes to hair and skin, fatigue, insomnia and persistent headaches as well as other physical changes.







In terms of the psychological impact of hormonal imbalances, when people talk about ‘not feeling themselves’ it is mostly due to heightened anxiety and a loss of concentration caused by persistent brain fog. Combined, these symptoms inevitably can cause people to feel emotional, frustrated and irritable in equal measure. A lack of control over your mental and physical state creates huge challenges, especially within a working environment.

Menopausal symptoms tend to interact with each other too: fatigue leads to a loss of concentration and a decline in confidence. They don't occur in isolation either but get mixed up with external events. Covid and its **associated stresses**, for example, created extra problems for many people. Menopause also starts at a critical time of life – e.g. **career progression**, raising a family, caring for older relatives, etc. All these pressures exacerbate the impact of hormonal imbalances.

Using the singular ‘menopause’ as an umbrella term to describe the different phases helps dispel commonly held myths around age and the length of time that menopause can impact someone's health and wellbeing. Further, one in four go through menopause without experiencing any symptoms at all. So, again, it is wrong to assume someone's health will suffer just because they are of a certain age. Education, openness and transparency help avoid any confusion.





## Becoming a menopause-friendly organisation

A menopause-friendly organisation is one that helps people to continue to thrive and be their best at work while going through menopause. According to Henpicked, there are several short, medium and long-term actions employers can undertake to ensure that they are adequately prepared to support employees through this period of their life. In Sally Leech's words, "If it makes the world of difference to individuals, it can generally make a world of difference to organisations."

Henpicked's core message is twofold: everyone should feel like they can talk openly about menopause at work and receive help regardless of how severe their symptoms are. And secondly, because there is no one right way to manage menopause, organisations should avoid prescribing solutions. Rather, an employer's role is to ensure people have access to the right information so that they can make informed choices about what feels right for them.

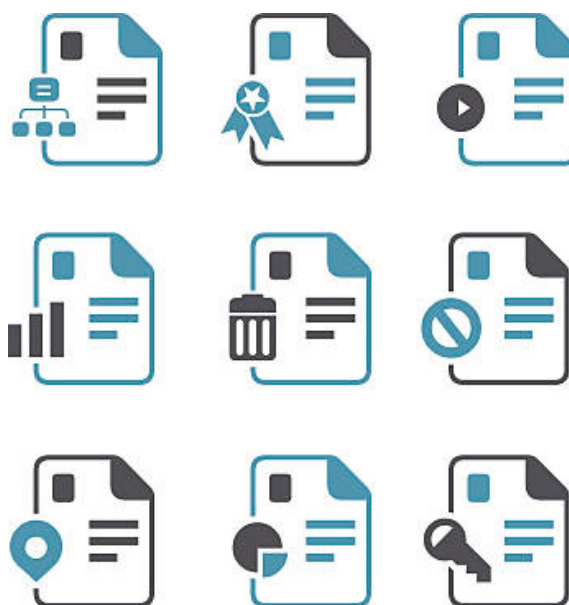
There is currently no legal obligation for organisations to offer support for people going through menopause. Its categorisation as a protected characteristic akin to a disability, however, is a current debate within parliament. And discussions are ongoing around whether menopause policies should become legislation. That aside, Henpicked urges organisations to act now to incorporate policies and procedures that will 'make the world of difference to individuals' as opposed to waiting for the moment when they have to become legally compliant.

Henpicked offers a 6-point plan for organisations wishing to make immediate improvements to support employees going through menopause. This checklist is also designed to deliver broader knowledge to the wider business, so that staff at all levels are better educated about menopause and aware of the type of support, as well as reasonable adjustments, they can offer to menopausal colleagues.

### 1. POLICY, GUIDANCE AND FACTSHEETS

A simple first step for employers is to make it clear exactly how the organisation supports menopause at work. This involves reviewing existing policies (e.g. flexible working, absence and sickness, etc.) to ensure they include menopause considerations, as well as creating new menopause policies, guidance documents or factsheets for dissemination. Deciding on which approach is best should be informed by what feels right for the organisation.

These materials should be easily accessible and communicated regularly throughout the employee journey so that they remain front of mind for all staff alongside other critical organisational practices and procedures. **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)** elements must also be addressed in terms of the language and imagery used, and the impact this may be having on people from different cultures, backgrounds and lifestyles.



Inclusive information could include highlighting the importance of all the different approaches for managing menopause such as hormone replacement therapy (HRT), complementary herbal treatments and lifestyle changes. Further, acknowledging that not everyone going through menopause may identify as female but may still be experiencing menopause, or be going through other significant hormonal changes that may bring about menopause symptoms, is advised.



## 2. CREATING A CULTURE WHERE MENOPAUSE CAN BE TALKED ABOUT OPENLY

According to Henpicked, discussing menopause at work should become unremarkable because of its implicit role in working life. There are multiple ways to develop this culture within organisations. **Engaging senior leaders** is a key aspect and getting them and other employees to share information, as well as their personal experiences, is a powerful cultural enabler. The intranet and other internal communications channels are valuable here.



Employee networks are another avenue to explore. Bringing together employees from across the organisation, either in person or online, to discuss menopause will help improve the confidence of those who have traditionally felt uncomfortable speaking about their experiences. These networks can also then take the lead in developing initiatives designed to raise awareness of menopause at work.

Some of the initiatives to consider include organising menopause awareness and education sessions for colleagues, helping promote campaigns like National Women's Health Week or World Menopause Day, as well as developing and promoting bespoke menopause-related activities. Getting younger employees or male 'allies' involved will add significant credence to these actions and further helps open up the conversation.



## 3. PROVIDE THE RIGHT TRAINING AND SUPPORT

Training should be available for everyone in the organisation, but as a catalyst for wider adoption and education, offering training to relevant **HR** and Occupational Health (OH) teams, as well as the senior leadership group, is recommended. They need to know what menopause is, its symptoms and how they can affect someone at work, what changes or reasonable adjustments they can make for people going through menopause, and how to have a supportive conversation about menopause.

Line managers should then be the beneficiaries of menopause training. They will most likely be the first point of contact for employees and therefore need to be well briefed about the organisation's approach to supporting menopause, as well as informed about menopause, its symptoms and the impact it can have at work. Examples shared during our session indicated how invaluable line manager support can be.

Henpicked emphasises the importance of 'supportive conversations training' to the whole development piece. This reinforces the idea that managers should not be diagnosing menopause or prescribing medical solutions but learning how to offer reassurance and adapting messaging to suit the needs of different people. Using tools like the Balance App and Daisy Network is recommended for signposting and tracking symptoms, especially for those who develop symptoms at an early age.





#### 4. EXISTING SUPPORT

Menopause is a health matter and organisations should already have lots of relevant resources they can draw upon to help employees. Employers are encouraged to scrutinise EAPs (Employee Assistance Programmes) and review education modules, counselling and occupational health provision, and other existing opportunities for providing immediate support. Anything related to wellbeing, lifestyle, self-care and long-term health will likely be beneficial.



Other things to consider are ways in which organisations can extend menopause assistance to the wider employee population. This includes offering similar support and guidance to those whose home life may be affected by partners going through menopause. Further, for people who have returned to work after surgery, being proactive and transparent during return-to-work interviews about the potential need for help with menopause symptoms, is advised.

Recognising that menopause is difficult to diagnose is important. As discussed, many physical and mental factors might trigger menopause symptoms. Henpicked urges organisations to utilise existing support pathways to engage with staff early on and get a clear picture to inform conversations and signpost employees on treatment options. This way, they can help to break the cycle of symptoms exacerbating each other.



#### 5. MENOPAUSE FRIENDLY WORKWEAR

Many organisations expect staff to wear uniforms or health and safety-related clothing and accessories. Restrictive clothing can be problematic for people who are suffering from menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes or cold sweats. Employees won't necessarily come forward with complaints or concerns about their workwear, so it's up to employers to take the lead in reviewing work clothing in line with menopause symptoms.

Organisations, in the first instance, should do an audit of employees who wear uniforms and other work-related clothing and consider how they may be affected by menopause. Then, before seeking to make wholesale changes,

look for ways in which existing garments can be adapted to better suit employee needs. If adaptations aren't possible, liaising with clothing suppliers is the logical next step to discuss what can be done to better accommodate menopause symptoms.

Changing uniforms or dress codes can be an arduous journey for many organisations. Henpicked emphasises the need to not 'overthink' solutions and instead look for 'quick wins' that will offer immediate support to employees who may find workwear challenging during menopause. Once these modifications have been implemented, longer terms plans can be made with suppliers around redesigning or updating uniforms for future orders.





## 6. MENOPAUSE FRIENDLY WORKPLACE

Thinking beyond workwear, organisations should also review the working environment to assess how compatible it is for managing menopause. Employees operating in different functions of a business will have contrasting experiences depending on the nature of their workstations. Being aware of environmental factors that could exaggerate the physical and psychological symptoms of menopause is essential to avoid potential issues.



Some general considerations applicable to most organisations would be to determine whether employees have easy access to cold drinking water, washroom facilities and toilets. Further, how easy is it for employees to control workplace temperature? And for those working in jobs that require standing up for long periods (e.g. customer service), are there provisions in place to allow staff to sit down or take extra breaks if required?

Engaging with health and safety and facilities management teams will help organisations to better explore options and decide what might make the biggest difference. It could be something as simple as moving a desk closer to a window or a different area of the office, or investing in changing areas, fans, air-conditioning equipment, and water-cooler amenities. Making reasonable adjustments like this can have a huge difference to someone's working life.

### Changing our attitude to menopause

According to Henpicked, rather than being hot, tired, angry and old, people going through menopause are capable, wise, experienced and knowledgeable – exactly the kind of talent any organisation wants to attract and retain. To truly leverage this latent potential, organisations need to empower employees to talk openly about menopause and provide the right training and resources to enable managers to offer the best possible support.

Sally Leech ended her presentation with a quote from a senior leader who has shared their story of experiencing menopause. The comment reinforces the invaluable role people going through menopause have in modern organisations: "There may be some things I need to do slightly differently or some support I need, but I'm still incredibly capable, I've got a huge amount to offer this organisation, I'm still going to do a really good job."

#### Menopause resources

Balance App: <https://www.balance-menopause.com/balance-app/>

Daisy Network: <https://www.daisynetwork.org/>

Henpicked Free Resources: <https://henpicked.net/menopause-hub/videos>

**Nigel Wright Group is Europe's number one consumer sector talent search firm and the leading and largest, multi-discipline recruitment business specialising in the North of England. We have 11 offices across the UK and Europe and one in America.**

We have significant experience in bringing together high-calibre candidates and local/global organisations for individual assignments and as part of a long-term account. Also, our depth and breadth for handling large scale, transformational recruitment projects is extensive. We have the capacity and capabilities required to provide clients with excellent service levels whilst helping achieve their EDI recruitment objectives.

We add value by helping clients, candidates, colleagues and our communities to prosper and achieve their ambitions by quickly connecting talent.

- Our clients trust us to quickly attract the highest calibre and most suitable candidates first time
- Our candidates trust us to understand them and their capabilities, tell them the truth, and enable their right move
- Our colleagues are highly motivated and feel valued with a strong sense of belonging
- Our communities benefit from how we use our market relationships